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ABSTRACT

This historical review describes the educational development of women in higher education. Emphasis is placed on the beginning of formal education for women, secondary and higher education, and higher education and the twentieth century. (HJM)

# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN WOMEN: A HISTORICAL VIEW

In the complex history of American higher education, one fact stands out conspicuously. It took American educationists two hundred years after they had established institutions of higher education for men to recognize the legitimacy of women's claims to similar education. Not until 1841, exactly 205 years after Harvard opened its doors to men, did three women receive the A.B. degree from Oberlin College, which, according to Newcomer, was "the first undisputed instance in this country of women receiving bachelor's degrees equal to those granted to men," (Newcomer, 1959:5).

The early American educational system was not only sexist but also elitist. Higher education was accessible only to the sons of the wealthy. Moreover, sexism and elitism were features common to the educational systems of most countries. Only relatively recent has most of the world been swept by the ideology of equal opportunity, although even today in many countries, including the U.S., the socioeconomically disadvantaged and women are still underrepresented in higher education.

In this paper, I will describe briefly the history of higher education in America, restricting my discussion to the educational development of women. Most of the historical material cited here can be found in the excellent studies of this topic by Thomas Woody (1966) and Mabel Newcomer (1959).

## The Beginning

In the best English tradition, men's colleges were established in the colonies during the seventeenth century to educate the sons of Anglo-Saxon land-owners to the service of the state and the church. Harvard was founded in 1636, followed by William and Mary. Although the major purpose of these early church-founded colleges was to serve the ministry, higher education was also

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# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN WOMEN:

# A HISTORICAL VIEW

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also recognized as professional education and Harvard included the law and teaching in its curriculum. Neither the ministry nor law and teaching, however, were open to the sons of less affluent families or to women. Most people were illiterate. Boys aged four to seven were sent to "dame schools" where they were taught the basic rudiments of reading and writing. They were not admitted to masters' schools unless, as quoted by Newcomer, they could "stand up and read words of two syllabes and keep their places" (Newcomer, 1959:7). In masters' schools, boys were taught a little arithmetic, Latin, and any other subject thought to be important at the time.

The school laws of the early seventeenth century made no provision for women: They were considered mentally inferior to men and unfit for for formal schooling. "Female learning" was ridiculed, even considered dangerous, since many believed that women's minds were not strong enough for learning and that they could easily become unbalanced in the pursuit of abstract ideas. Moreover, it was feared that if women learned to read and write, they might neglect household tasks or get into mischief by forging their husbands' signatures (Newcomer, 1959:7).

Girls were taught at home all the skills considered necessary for their duties as housewives and mothers. Those who were lucky enough to enter the dame schools were encouraged to leave after learning a "little reading." Yet, by the close of the colonial period, literacy had become quite common among women, not as the result of well-formulated plans and practices but as the result of certain fortuituous circumstances and conditions created by economic considerations.

In the South, tutors hired to educate the sons of wealthy plantation owners were generally asked to include the daughters in their instruction. In New England, particularly in sparsely settled areas, the frugal town fathers, eager to get their money's worth, encouraged the masters of town schools to teach the girls whenever boys were absent: that is, before or after school hours, or during the summer when boys were busy with farm work (Newcomer, 1959:8). The first time that girls attended a master's school with boys was in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1769; and by the end of the eighteenth century, girls were allowed to attend school with boys in a number of instances (Woody, 1966:I, 142).

The situation in the Central Colonies was somewhat different. As early as the eighteenth century, the schools organized by Quakers, and--to some extent--the various German and Dutch congregations allowed girls to be taught reading, writing, and religion alongside boys (Woody, 1966:I, 217). Later in the so-called adventure schools, girls were taught French, Latin, Greek, and other studies. Because of their good reputations, some of these early special schools began to attract pupils from a distance and became the forerunners of a network of female academies and seminaries. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, they began to provide training for girls above the elementary level.

## Secondary and Higher Education

The early nineteenth century marked the beginning of a widespread movement advocating secondary education for both boys and girls. Private and public schools for boys spread widely. Six private schools for girls were established during the thirty-year period between 1790 and 1820, and 104 more during the next thirty-year period. Another 96 private schools for girls were established

during the decade preceding the Civil War (Woody, 1966:I, 392-95). Most of these schools, however, were for the well-to-do few. Girls from less affluent backgrounds were not offered secondary education until public high school education became available. In 1824, the first public high school for girls was opened in Worcester, Massachusetts, followed by one in New York City, and another in Boston. The last one promptly closed because of its inability to meet the overwhelming demand (Newcomer, 1959:10). As public high schools spread, girls were admitted with less reluctance, particularly if there were only a few of them. Since public high schools were designed to prepare students for college, inevitably girls who received the same training as boys would eventually want to go on to college.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, girls were beginning to get some rudiments of college training in private academies and seminaries established primarily to train girls to be teachers. These schools emphasized the temporary nature of such learned activities, assuming that girls would go back to housework and child-rearing after a few years of teaching. At the beginning, most of these academies or seminaries provided girls with a high school education at best. Later, some achieved junior college status and eventually evolved into four-year women's colleges.

Georgia Female College, chartered in 1836 is accepted by some authorities as the first women's college in the country, conferring the A.B. degree (Newcomer, 1959:12). And by 1841, as mentioned earlier, girls had started receiving bachelor's degrees equal in quality to those granted to men.

Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, attitudes and practices regarding the formal education of women had changed dramatically. Increasingly, more women were participating in higher education, and increasingly, more women were in coeducational institutions. Many writers explain this development as a result of the following factors.

For one thing, industrial production--which grew rapidly in the early nineteenth century--replaced the home as the unit of production and, at the same time, created a demand for women workers. In 1831, 80 percent of the mill workers in Massachusetts were women (Roby, 1972a). Although no training was needed for these jobs, the unprecendented participation of women in the labor market made the argument that a woman's place is in the home increasingly harder to defend. For another, many parents felt that their limited resources should be reserved for their son's education before their daughter's. The rapid growth of public education provided these parents with the means for educating both their sons and daughters.

As public schooling spread, the demand for teachers grew. In 1850, there were two million school-age children requiring about two hundred thousand teachers, 90 percent of whom were women (Roby, 1972a:122). The need for teachers was a strong incentive to include women in higher education. First, some of the arguments against education of women were becoming more unconvincing: If women were to teach men, then women should be given a good education. Second, those who were still against women's participation in the labor market were becoming more and more aware of the economic advantages of hiring women teachers. In the 1830s, in Pennsylvania, a "female" teacher could be had for $9 a month,

while the salaries for the men were two to four times higher (Newcomer, 1959:14). Realizing that seminaries were not providing enough teachers, state commissions in New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts had started opening state-supported normal training schools for girls as early as the 1830s. These schools were followed by others that provided teacher training to both sexes (Woody, 1966:I, 471-500).

Third, participation of women in higher education was further facilitated by the conditions created by the Civil War. The decline in male enrollments during this period left colleges in desperate financial need, thus forcing them to open their doors to women. In 1863, the number of women students in some institutions of higher learning (e.g., University of Wisconsin) exceeded that of men (Roby, 1972a:123). Moreover, state universities and colleges in the West opened their doors to women because these states could not afford separate educational systems. In 1874, Hosmer wrote that "for economical reasons, the highest education makes necessary coeducation," and many other educationists of the time accepted the economic explanation (Woody, 1966:II, 256-59).

Yet another factor contributing to the increasing acceptance of women in institutions of higher learning was financial donations. Cornell allowed entry to women only after Henry W. Sage gave an endowment of $250,000 for women's education (Woody, 1966:II, 248). Similarly, the admission of women to Johns Hopkins University Medical School in 1893 was clearly tied to Mary E. Garrett's generous contribution of $350,000 and to other funds collected from women throughout the United States (Woody, 1966:II, 358). Finally, the movement for equal rights helped

the educational movement, although not all of the early advocates of women's education were stout supporters of the suffrage movement (Newcomer, 1959:18).

By 1870, the official estimate of women students in institutions of higher learning was about 11,000, or approximately one woman for every four men. One in seven baccalaureates awarded went to women, an incredible achievement, considering that their involvement in higher education had started about two hundred years after that of men (Newcomer, 1959:19).

Nor was this accomplishment easy. Even with women's increased participation in the labor force and in education, many people held to the belief that women's education was a poor investment, that it was not feasible on equal terms with men, and that it could have harmful consequences both for women and for their families.

Obviously, far fewer people in the late nineteenth century than in the colonial period would feel that all women needed was a little reading and writing, but even among advocates of higher education for women, many were quick to agree that women might not be equal to men in intellectual ability and should, therefore, be educated in separate institutions or at least have a separate curriculum. Durant, founder of Wellesley, thought an hour of domestic work a day an absolutely essential component of an educational program for women (Newcomer, 1959:56).[2] Others were still afraid that women might become hysterical under the stress of study and of intellectual activity.

Some early scenes remind one of comic opera. When the University of Missouri opened its doors to women in 1870, they were first allowed

to enter the normal department. After administrators saw that nothing disastrous came of this innovation, women were cautiously admitted to some of the lectures in the university building with men, "providing always they were to be marched in good order, with at least two teachers, one in front and the other in the rear of the column as guards" (Newcomer, 1959:14). When this further incursion caused no stir, women were admitted to chapel and were allowed to "lift their voices in prayer" with the men!

Some of the debates were just as comical. The appropriateness of the term freshmen for women was questioned endlessly. Some objected to the use of the term college for schools for women; Emma Willard, proposing her plans for the education of women to the New York State Legislature in 1819, refrained from using the term for fear of ridicule, although the term was freely used for the girls' schools in the South (Newcomer, 1959:11).

By the end of the century, however, some of the women's colleges were busy establishing programs identical to those of more prestigious male institutions. Smith, which opened in 1875, was one of the first women's colleges recognized as having a college curriculum identical to that of men's schools, followed by Bryn Mawr, which opened the first graduate department for women (Woody, 1966:II, 182-203).

## Higher Education and the Twentieth Century

Since the turn of the century, two major features of women's educational attainment can be noted. First, the number of women in higher education has increased, but this increase has not followed a smooth pattern.

Roby states that when "economic needs have declined, women have quickly been discouraged in more or less subtle ways from enrolling in and/or fulfilling degree requirements of institutions of higher education" (Roby, 1972a:119). Information provided by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (1969) indicate that between 1900 and 1930, the rate of increase in the number of bachelor's and first professional degrees was greater for women than for men: 833 percent compared with 232 percent. But between 1930 and 1960, the rate of increase in degrees earned was greater for men than for women: 247 percent compared with 185 percent. Women earned about 20 percent of the total bachelor's and first professional degrees during the period 1900-1910. Following the First World War, this proportion rose sharply to about 40 percent in 1930 and 1940. When the returning GIs crowded the colleges during the 1950s, the proportion of bachelor's and first professional degrees awarded to women declined to 24 percent; in 1968, it went up to 42 percent again.

Similar trends can be observed for advanced degrees earned by women: a rapid expansion, followed by peaks and declines. For instance, only about 300 women earned master's degrees at the turn of the century. Between 1900 and 1930, there was a twentyfold increase in the number of women who were awarded the master's. During the thirties, 40 percent of all master's degrees were earned by women; by the 1950s, women were earning fewer than 30 percent. In 1900, women earned 6 percent of all doctoral degrees; by 1920, this proportion had reached a peak of 15 percent.

Since then, women have earned relatively fewer doctorates: e.g., about 14 percent of all doctoral degrees currently awarded go to women.

Thus, the enrollments of and degrees awarded to women at each educational level peaked during the Second World War years, as the enrollment of men declined, causing many colleges to recruit women more actively, as had been the case during the Civil War period.

Roby declares: "With the war's end and soldiers' return, journalists, economists, and educators fearing a glutted labor market, admonished women to leave their wartime jobs, and glamorized domesticity and full-time motherhood as they never had before" (Roby, 1972a:130).

After the war, the percentage of university acceptances and degrees awarded to women plunged to levels below those in 1930. During the economic expansion of the late fifties and sixties, women were again urged back to school and work, and the percentage of graduate and professional degrees awarded to women began to increase, although never reaching the levels of the 1920s and 1930s.

The second feature which characterizes the higher education of American women since the turn of the century is that the gains in the educational attainment of women failed to narrow the gap between the sexes. In fact, the educational opportunities offered to men and those offered to women may have become more unequal during the present century. As a recent DHEW committee concluded: "American women (is) not only failing to hold her own, but (is) losing ground" (1971:55).

Today more women have access to higher education--but the same is true for men. Nearly all young people from the ages six to fifteen are enrolled in school, but enrollment rates begin to fall off among

older groups. At just about the age when the young person has completed high school and is making decisions regarding work, marriage, or college, sex differences begin to appear. By age 18 or 19 the enrollment of females is 20 percentage points below that of males; that is, 40 percent of women as compared to 60 percent of men are enrolled in school (Ferris, 1971:22), even though in high school girls earn better grades and score higher on achievement tests than do boys (College Entrance Examination Board, 1970:I, Passim). The pattern is repeated in college. Women make better undergraduate records and are more likely to complete the baccalaureate within four years after college entry; but still, fewer go to graduate school (Astin & Panos, 1969:29; Folger, Astin, & Bayer, 1970:283). In short, there is a funnelling effect: the proportion of women completing each successive degree level gets steadily smaller than the proportion of men.

The literature is replete with studies explaining the inequalities in the educational attainment of men and of women. I will simply mention a few of the more obvious factors. First, girls are still, in one way or another, discouraged from going to college and to graduate school. Parents have different expectations for girls than for boys; they may make sacrifices for a son's college education which would become an intolerable burden in the case of a daughter. Girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds--even though they may be highly able--are not as well represented in colleges and universities as are boys from similar backgrounds and with similar abilities (Folger, Astin, & Bayer, 1970:283). Second, the existing academic structure itself incorporates concrete, institutionalized obstacles to women: e.g., rules pertaining to admission policies, financial aid, residency, and full-time requirements.

The difficulty of transferring credit and the shortage of child-care facilities and health services work greater hardships on women than on men. (Roby, 1972b:122-126). Finally, certain attitudes and sex-role expectations--both on the part of women students and on the part of others--deflate women's egos, reduce their motivation, and hinder their educational progress.

As Mary Bunting, former President of Radcliffe, exclaimed in 1961, there is still a general "climate of unexpectation" regarding women, often strengthened by the negative or unsupportive attitudes of many faculty members and administrators who advise women to "think of themselves as potential wives and mothers, or, at best, as teachers and nurses" (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971:55).

When we compare the educational advances of women with those of men, it becomes clear that we have not "come a long way."

What does the future hold? Two major trends are discernible. First, there is the economic situation. It has been estimated that, last year, as many as 7.5 million women were looking for jobs without success (Mathews, 1972:67). Moreover, higher educational institutions are facing major financial crises. As Roby suggests, it is too early to know exactly what statistical effect this situation will have "on the enrollment of women students and their completion of higher education...The growth or decline of inequalities between higher educational opportunities available to women and men will very much depend upon which has greater influence on educational policies: The need of institutions of higher education, faced with declining applications, for more students; or the labor force's slackening need for women, including many categories of professional women" (Roby, 1972a:134).

Perhaps it is time we established policies that will serve to disentangle women's participation in higher education from marketplace fluctuations, and worked to build policies on the more secure foundation of the basic right of every person to develop and realize his or her full human potential.

Our past experience has taught us, however, that in a crunch legal protection rather than ideology is important. In this respect, the recent feminist movement has had an immense impact on our educational system. The Executive Order of 1967 and the 1972 amendment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 pertaining to affirmative action and the new Women's Educational Equity Act of 1973, which is now under consideration on the Hill, can be almost entirely attributed to the unending efforts of the feminists; it is these legislative acts that may eventually change the treatment of women in higher education. So perhaps, in time, we shall overcome.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]Presented at the Symposium on the Development of Women Through History, International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Ann Arbor, Aug. 21-25, 1973.

[2]As late as 1969--and perhaps even today--Vassar undergraduates were expected to clean their rooms, which were periodically inspected. In neighboring Haverford College, men and women interested in earning an income were paid to clean the rooms and the dormitory facilities; otherwise, a maid service was available. But perhaps the Vassar experience provides the girls with a good training for life since employed women are expected to carry a full load at both work and housework.

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